



“Staying Connected”

John 15:1-17

7/15/2001 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons



The first half of our scripture passage from John 15 is Jesus’ metaphor of the vine and the branches. Verses 9-17 are an elaboration of the metaphor. So Jesus was using the image of a grape vineyard to describe our relationship with God.

Jesus said He was like the vine (or the trunk of the tree) and God is the Gardener, we are the branches. What we do with our lives is similar to the fruit that the vine produces. As in our own gardens, if a branch is cut off from the plant, it is denied nutrients from the source and will quickly die.

Accordingly,¹ Jesus concludes that “If you remain in Me and My teaching remains in you, then if you ask for anything you want, you will have it. All this brings glory to God if you and I bear fruit and that is what being a disciple is all about.”



As always, His listeners appreciated the simplicity. Notice the direct rhetoric: IF we do something, THEN something else will happen. IF we stay connected to Christ, (meaning that if we remember His teachings and attempt to follow His words), THEN God will apparently give us what we want. But that causes us to ask more questions because we do not get everything we want. But verses 9-17 explain it again.

Jesus says that if we obey God’s commands and remain in God’s love, then our joy will be complete. That is, if we love one another (that being how we obey God),² God will give us whatever we ask in Jesus’ name.

Jesus seems to be saying that in order to live a satisfying life, what we should aim at is following God’s wisdom by loving one another just as Jesus loved us. And He goes on to

¹ in verses 7 & 8

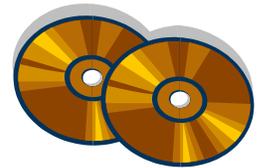
² then (again in verse 16)

describe this type of love as the ability to sacrifice one’s life for another.

We are well aware that in our time and culture, more people are tending to be self-oriented. Young adults go into job interviews asking for benefits and perks instead of seeking how they can contribute their skills and experiences to the team they hope to join. We’ve become such a consumer-oriented culture that we have unrealistic expectations about our lifestyle, our salaries and the things to which we think we’re entitled. Take computer software.



We see a friend’s small CD disk with a particularly good computer program on it.



The same could be said about a friend’s music CD. But we look at that small thin CD and think that Microsoft has enough money and today you can copy any CD you want for pennies. Most people think that they’re *entitled* to that software because they want it and Microsoft has more money than they do.

It’s stealing if you copy that disk without paying the full price for it. So from your own faith’s ethical perspective, do not steel. If you can’t afford to buy it, you don’t deserve to have it. And oh, by the way, God *hates* lying (notice the word “hate.”)

Instead of trying to get the latest software that was stolen, most people look at obtaining the product as they do the rest of the consumer goods in society. They pay for the product and register themselves as the owner. By doing so, they enter into a business partnership with the makers of the software.

They do their part of the partnership by reading the manual and trying to use the product for what they do at work or at home.

The maker of the software does their part by paying representatives to be trained and available by the telephone to help you if you’re having

trouble learning the product. From writing down questions asked and suggestions to make the software better, the vendor pays programmers to make the program better in order to meet the needs of their clients.

In the case of Microsoft, they're paying literally thousands of programmers and support people to keep improving the product so that every year, our computers work faster and more efficiently – serving us personally in what we are trying to do. In no other field in our Western Culture does it get better and better every year. But this continual improvement happens only when you enter into a connected and honest give-and-take relationship with the makers of the product.



If you lie, steal and unfairly try to get without giving your part of the partnership, you're going to get very frustrated. In terms of using computers, it is going to become aggravating and

inconvenient – costing you more in loss of time and money than if you would have truthfully and honestly entered into a fair partnership with the software maker in the first place. The parallels to the Christian life are so obvious that I don't even have to encourage those of you who are in the second half of your life to pay attention.

Throughout your life, you've seen, over and over again, people who have taken what they thought was "the easy way" and short-cut their way through a mediocre life on the take – never doing their fair share of anything and living in misery because of it. Through your years you've heard the "old timers" call them "dead beats" and "unmotivated" underachievers. Perhaps, in your early years, you've found yourself in that boat and after some significant and life-threatening emotional experience, you grew up and started doing your half of the bargain. I speak from my own experience.

What happens when we don't do our half of the bargain is that we screw up our own lives and that of others as well. If we start out taking God seriously, but for one reason or another, have

absolutely nothing to do with others who are trying to take God seriously, we end up living in isolation. It's one thing to not gather with one religious group or another because your needs are not being met and they're scratching where it doesn't itch. It's one thing to leave one expression of faith because what you're getting makes you feel worse than when you went in there. It's one thing to leave one expression of organized religion because it is toxic and judgmental and is frankly 50 years behind all that you've read and experienced in your life. But it's pathetic when we permanently cut ourselves off from all others of a faith expression, only to spend the rest of our lives niggling about a stupid or hurtful thing a priest or minister has said or done but never intentionally trying to grow in our spiritual understanding again for the rest of our lives.

I suggest we ask people, who simply have nothing to do with so-called "organized religion," just how it is that they have intentionally come to grow in their understanding of God. Ask them what it is that is most important in their lives – but you better listen to their pain first. Because if all they can still do is complain about a denomination giving legal support funds to insure a black Harvard professor got a fair trial thirty years ago, . . .³ If all they can do is sit around and moan that their priest or minister actually dared to have a personal opinion on a social issue that was different from their personal opinion, (how dare them) . . . If all they can do is talk about what isn't right with the religion with which they had been most familiar, then God help them.

God help them because maybe they're so insecure that they can't tolerate being around other individuals who think differently than they. May God truly help them if they keep choosing to cut themselves off from any educational or growth experience, because if they do, they've cut themselves off from any group that is trying their best, humbly or not, to learn as they go.

What is it that you're intentionally doing, out of your own motivation, to learn about God and

³ Angela Davis

find your path through life where you come to find healing and learning and peace? Because if you're not trying anything and you're making no effort on your own (or with anyone else) to find the best spiritual path for you, then you might as well grab another beer and several slices of pizza and look for the next distraction to take your mind off the meaningless life you are making for yourself.

Yes, I know. A lot of time people in churches seem like health food: allegedly good for you but bland, expensive and the cause of gastrointestinal upsets.

It's also true that most all of you have known all your life that just because someone doesn't attend a church, it doesn't mean they'll never find God. If God *was* dependent on organized religion, the whole world would have been on a journey to the infernal region in some sort of outmoded hand-held basket that no one uses any more.⁴ By now, most all of our society knows that organized religion is not the same as spirituality. Often times, people find God in spite of their experiences in churches.

As it is, it's God Who is the One Who does the finding and God reaches out to anyone – especially those whom the church has judged as not churchy enough. God always ends up using other people to help us grow in our understanding, compassion and love. God uses you and me to minister to others, with or without the church.

The danger of not being connected to the vine (or the flow of Christianity as it is expressed by groups of God's people), is that anything can slip in the back door of your world view. If nothing matters in your life *but* mom, dad, the flag and apple pie – you are living only for the next holiday and a trip to the Hallmark greeting card store. Other than that, it wouldn't matter *what* you believed or taught in the way you lived your life or taught your kids and grandkids.

Again, it's like computers. Most of us use a particular problem to do our work. We get real

⁴ “Going to Hell in a Hand Basket”

good at it because we use it all the time. In time, we come to the point that this program is all we know and we also come to believe that this program is the only program anyone should ever use for the job. We tell everyone we know it is the *only* way to go and *we know about what we're talking*.

It isn't easy to shift over from that with which you're comfortable using in order to learn something else – even though we might find that people put years and millions of dollars into developing this other product. But without people sharing their experiences in articles, reviews, books and personally, we'd be going merrily on our way for years, only to find out that the rest of the world has already switched over to this other product and they no longer make or support it. And here we had become “experts” on using that program.

If you haven't read the newsletter, God has upgraded the software on Christianity. Here we had, back in the first century, a whole temple-full of Certified Religious Network Engineers and Administrators, authoritatively teaching everyone that “this is the way we do things around here. *We* know the rules and *we* know the people who don't belong to our group. Do what we say and do or your life will crash.”

So Jesus came along and told them, right to their faces, that they needed to trash their whole operating system and get with the new programs.

They killed Him for that but not before He appointed some followers to go out and start new user groups of faith and learning. They were to start up new networks with His new operating system that would not only become the world-wide internet of Christian fellowship but also communities where you could be touched and loved for who you already are. And you wouldn't need certification. And you wouldn't have to be higher up on the socioeconomic ladder to get good treatment. And the software we are to use is *shareware*. You try it and if it helps you find ways to give of yourself to make the world better, you



support it by doing your end of the partnership with God.

Look around at people in your life. Do you see some of them cut off and stagnating? Do you see them operating with outmoded programs, old views and prejudices that only serve to keep them further removed from a full and authentic life – connected in some intimacy with others?

Look around and listen to people who are buying cheap quick-answer pop philosophies out of the trunk of people's cars – trying to get a good deal that only perpetuates their independent hacker lifestyles. They'll be sitting at the muffler or oil change places in their lives and reading some schlock out of a magazine, written by someone with a neat idea on "actuating your potential" or "finding happiness through kicking your feet, jumping up and down stairs or dieting for the deities." But you already know that the hard experiences and issues in life take a lot more discipline, scholarship and work. And they'll continue to collect their shallow Americana trends out of other people's conversations at the water cooler, on the TV talk shows and at bars. Their lives will be no different than those over whom Jesus wept when He looked at their mediocrity.

Jesus invested His time and imagination in this parable about the vineyard for one reason. He knew that as soon as His closest followers would start their user groups of faith, it wouldn't be long before the most verbal people would be saying "But this is the way we do things around here." We are the default standard that everyone should follow." Jesus knew that they'd get so set in their ways of using the mental and spiritual software with which they became comfortable, that few would be willing to upgrade to the newness of God's constantly improving spiritual software.

Jesus also knew that if people stayed connected, kept sharing and kept treating others like He treated them, some people would stay open to the newness of God's Holy Spirit and grow.

So how about you. Do you want to upgrade your spirituality? Do you want to learn some new

programs on which God has been working for centuries? It's free, you know, but you've got to pick up the manual and actually read it. Try it next time you go about doing something in relationship with people.

It uses the new Inferred wireless technology and you don't need a mouse. You don't need to be that good at typing, you just issue verbal remarks. They're simple and often short commands. Nothing to memorize.

You say things like, "Thanks God, it is truly a beautiful day and I feel thankful to be alive." You say things like, "God, I'm about to talk with someone who has a lot of personal problems and I ain't no shrink but I figure I'm running across them only because You think that by me being who I naturally am, I might be able to make them feel they are loved." You say things like "I love you and I don't spend much time with you but when I do, I want you to know that you are safe and I will listen to anything you have to say and I care about what you're going through."

With this new spiritual operating system, sometimes you don't even have to say anything. You just show up, you try to laugh and you care.

One thing about upgrading and staying current with God's software; it helps a lot to go to user groups. Nobody knows everything, not even the group facilitators, but when you show up and pay attention, you find help. You even find yourself helping others. And once in a while, the Software Maker even shows up in person.

